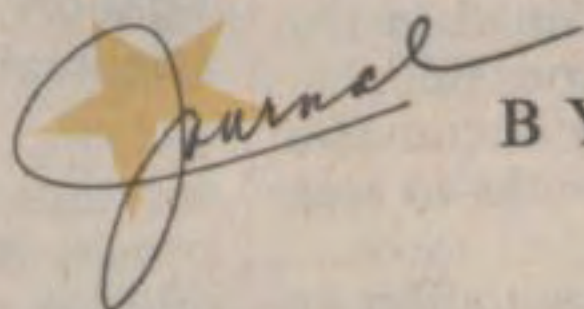




BY JOE POPPER



Photos by KEITH MYERS/The Star

Boxer Stacy Prestage worked out last week at the Eastside Boxing Club in preparation for a match at the Kansas City

Market Center. For some members of the club, boxing offers a rare chance for earning respect.

Hope for those on the ropes

The young man was on his toes dancing, the classic, lethal ballet of the boxing ring. His boots were unlaced and he danced slowly, warming his muscles, cocking his head from side to side, throwing punches in three-quarter time.

It was 4 p.m., the hour when the Eastside Boxing Club opens its doors to the scores of fighters who convene there every day.

By 4:15, the club, which occupies an old post office near the

corner of Truman Road and Prospect Avenue, was filling up.

Short rhythmic bursts of popping sounds echoed from the back of the gym as the boxers began working the heavy bags.

A young fighter named Jacob Punshon was pummeling a 70-pound bag. He threw steady left-right combinations that thudded deep into creaking leather. Even when he walked away, the bag continued shuddering like a carnival flag in a stiff wind.

"I try to knock everybody
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Club partner Jim Fulton consoled Prestage after she was knocked out in the fourth round this week.

Boxing club helps those on the ropes

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out," said Punshon, whose amateur record is 10-1, with five knockouts.

"When I fight, I like to fight. You know what I mean?"

His eyes are deep-set and melancholy. His face looks slightly used. He is 18 years old.

He ran his gloved hand over the top of his close-cropped hair.

"I have gray hair," he said. "I've had some stress in my life. I was on the street for a long time. Bud Keys, who runs this place, he took me in. You want to hear a story, you come back tomorrow and I'll tell you a story."

Keys was standing nearby, nodding. He founded the Eastside Boxing Club six years ago out on Truman Road.

He is a bail bondsman. He has white hair, steel-rimmed glasses, a ready smile and arms like tree limbs. When someone skips out on one of his bonds, Keys does his own hunting.

"I make my money getting parents of kids like these out of jail," he said. "So these kids are the victims of the environment where I make my living. This gym is my way of giving something back to them."

Another fighter wandered by, his hair in corn rows, his biceps like piled-up walnuts sculpted in cement.

"Hey, Preach," said Keys.

Preach's real name is Robert Howard. He is 25.

"I'll tell you what," Preach said. "I ain't never done nothing successful in my whole life. Never. I got kicked out of every school I ever went to for fighting. Now maybe here I finally found something I can do right."

A glimmer of hope

Every boxing gym in the world has the same odor, an exotic mixture of rancid sweat, old leather and newborn hope.

"Hope is important here," said Jim Fulton, who is Keys' partner in the club.

"Some of these kids will achieve something as boxers, some won't. But in the meantime, they'll be learning self-discipline and working honestly toward something

they want."

Fulton, a successful Kansas City businessman, began devoting both time and money to the club about three years ago. He underwrote the recent purchase of the abandoned post office building the club moved into two weeks ago.

"I've been a right-wing conservative all my life," he said. "I always advocated more prisons, you know, just lock 'em up and throw away the key."

"But I've changed my thinking since I started working with these kids. That punitive kind of program doesn't work at all. Education is what these kids need. Education and jobs are what are important. That's the kind of thing we have to get behind in this country."

He pointed toward Punshon, who was shadowboxing in a corner.

"Jake's one of the toughest kids I've ever met," he said. "He's been fighting on the street his whole life. Now he comes here instead."

A few months ago, just before an amateur bout, Fulton asked Punshon if he was going to win.

"Yes!"

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I can't even stand the thought of losing."

Unanswered questions

The next afternoon, Punshon led the way out to what had once been the post office loading dock. He said he didn't want to tell his story in front of other people. He sat on the edge of the dock.

"I grew up in Northeast Kansas City," he said. "My mom had an abusive boyfriend when I was younger, and I was on the streets all the time. I got involved with gangbanging, smoking weed, ditching school. Everything started going wrong."

"My mom couldn't do nothing with me. When I was 15, she told me I had to go to school, go to work or leave."

"So I'm homeless, right, sleeping in cars. Nothing worked out. All my friends turned out to be fakes and punks. All I had left was my clothes."

"I started thinking everything was my own fault. I was about to kill myself. Life had a lot of unan-



Boxers Joe Punshon (left) and Johnny Saysoff squared off recently in front of the Eastside Boxing Club. The club, founded six years ago

at a site on Truman Road, is now located in an old post office at 1510 Prospect Ave.



Each week in his Star Journal, Joe Popper takes us on a journey, exploring in his distinctive way the hearts, minds and character of Kansas City and the Midwest.

swered questions for me.

"Then I went into this gym when it was still out on Truman Road, and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. It just stood right up. I knew this is what I should be doing."

"Now I'm getting my GED, I'm writing poetry, drawing, finding ways to express who I am. And I'm training all the time."

"See, I'm scared to be a failure. I don't want to be nothing all my life. But the only time I feel good about myself is when I'm training."

The first time I won a boxing match, I slept with the trophy.

"That's the truth, man. I got no reason to lie because I got nothing to lose."

Economy of motion

Back in the gym, Fulton was watching two boxers starting to spar in the full-size ring.

"What's fascinating about this place is how united everybody is," he said. "Black and white kids all mixed up together. And believe me when they go to a match, they

hang together. They are a united group."

The ring was surrounded by boxers. They draped themselves on the ropes.

As they watched the fighters in the ring begin to dance, slip punches, throw rapid combinations, their heads never moved. Only their eyes moved. Snake eyes.

In boxing, economy of motion is at a premium. Skill is measured in microseconds.

"That's what you box with, all your skill," Punshon said. "But you fight with your heart."

Lighting it up

Last Tuesday night, some 1,200 fight fans filled the convention center next to the Park Place Hotel in the East Bottoms.

Three pros from the Eastside Club were on the card.

One of the best — "our crown

jewel," said Jim Fulton — was Stacy Prestage, a former Women's International Boxing Federation champion.

Prestage was knocked out in the fourth round.

Punshon was in the crowd. After that fight, he drifted out to the lobby.

"Man, I didn't expect that," he said. "It just shows how unpredictable boxing is."

He stared into the darkened auditorium toward the spotlights playing on the elevated ring.

"A night like this shows you a lot," he said. "These people, you know, a lot of them see boxing as a business instead of what it really is for someone like me."

"For me, boxing is about one thing. It's about respect. And one day I'm going to be up there, and I'm going to light Kansas City up, just light it all up. You'll see."

KEITH MYERS/The Star